

Kickass 341

Chapter 341

Abby

Today has been a whirlwind of frustration and disappointment.

After the health inspector shut down my restaurant and the news media turned against me, I know I have to do something. I can't just sit around and let my reputation crumble without a fight.

So, I decide to take matters into my own hands and try to unravel the mystery behind the string of unfortunate incidents that have befallen my business.

I've been pacing back and forth in my living room for nearly an hour, pondering how to go about this. My phone has practically been ringing nonstop, and finally, I decide to answer it with a sigh.

It's Chloe.

"What is it?" I bark, far more sharply than I meant to.

Chloe pauses for a moment, and I can tell she's perturbed. "Abby, honey," she finally says in a cautious tone, "are you okay?"

I stop my pacing, chewing my lower lip. "Well, not really," I admit with a wry chuckle. "This is bullshit. All of it."

"I know," Chloe says with a sigh. "How are you holding up?"

I pause for a moment as I look around at my living room. It's a bit of a mess right now; at some point, during my frantic search for information, I dug through my filing cabinet to find the documents from the potential arson case that went nowhere. Papers are scattered all around my coffee table.

“I’m, um, fine,” I say. “Just trying to figure stuff out.”

She sighs again. “You’re playing detective, aren’t you?”

Her words hit home. She knows me too well; there’s no sense in hiding it.

“Yeah, I’m trying to get to the bottom of it,” I say. “Chloe, my kitchen has always been spotless. Up until the cooking competition business started, I had never had a food poisoning outbreak; so how is it that, all of a sudden, I’m getting two back-to-back—one of which is the Alpha gathering?”

Chloe is silent for several moments. My words all just came out in a rush, and I realize that I sound a little crazy right now.

“Abby,” she says cautiously, “I understand where you’re coming from. But—”

“No buts,” I say with an exasperated sigh. “I know this wasn’t my fault. And you can all think I’m crazy, but I’m getting to the bottom of this. Goodbye.”

Before Chloe can answer, I’m hanging up the phone and tossing it down on the couch, returning once more to my investigation.

First on my list is to review the CCTV footage from the restaurant. I spend hours going through the recordings, starting with the first food poisoning incident that occurred right before the cook-off.

I watch as my staff rushes around the kitchen, preparing the meal that we shared the day before the cook-off. But nothing is amiss, no matter how hard I search; they’re all just as professional as ever, washing their hands, disinfecting tools, and cleaning surfaces.

Dead end.

Next, I examine the recordings from the night of the burst pipe and electrical outage. Right up until the point when the power went out, there's nothing. No hooded figures, no one shoving stuff down my drain, no one even walking in the general direction of the basement door.

Another dead end.

Feeling a bit more frustrated now, I move on to the recordings from the day of the Alpha party. I watch as my team and I prepare the food and set up the dining area.

Everything seems perfectly normal. Once again, the entire restaurant is spotless, and all of my staff are as professional as they possibly can be. I watch intently for hours until my head throbs, watching every movement, every tiny detail, over and over again.

But nothing is amiss.

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"Mr. Caldwell," I say, trying to keep my tone polite, "I need a favor."

He turns to me, his expression one of mild annoyance. "Abby," he says, "I'm in the middle of something important. Can this wait?"

I take a deep breath and decide to push. "It's about the CCTV footage from your security cameras," I say. "I need to see the recordings from a few specific dates."

Mr. Caldwell raises an eyebrow. "And why should I help you with that?"

I hesitate for a moment, choosing my words carefully. "You've known me for a long time, Mr. Caldwell," I say. "I've always been a loyal customer, and I've done a lot of business with you. I'm in a difficult situation right now, and I could really use your help."

"What makes you think that my CCTV footage could help your little situation?"

“Because,” I reply, feeling a little more annoyed now, “I know you have cameras all around the perimeter of your building, including the alleyway between our businesses. Surely you can see my entrances on your cameras, can’t you?”

He sighs and looks me up and down, as if sizing me up. “Very well,” he says begrudgingly. “But this had better not take too long. I have a collector coming in an hour.”

Relief washes over me as Mr. Caldwell leads me to his office, where he has a computer set up to access the CCTV footage. I explain the dates I’m interested in, and he begins searching through the recordings.

We watch the footage together, starting with the day of the first food poisoning incident. I see myself and my staff coming in and out of the restaurant, but nothing seems out of the ordinary.

We move on to the day of the pipe burst and the electrical problems. Again, I watch as my usual staff comes in and out, but there is no one who doesn’t belong.

Finally, we reach the date of the Alpha party. I hold my breath as I watch the recording, hoping against hope that I will find some clue, some evidence of what has gone wrong. But as the minutes tick by, it becomes clear that there is nothing unusual in the footage.

“See?” he says as he flicks through the footage. “Nothing.”

I can’t hide my disappointment. He’s right; there is nothing. “Try the alley footage,” I say, still determined. “There has to be something.”

He complies with a sigh, flipping to the alley footage. I watch the dark alleyway from the night of the Alpha party, searching for any hidden figures or anything of the sort.

But there’s nothing. Just an empty alleyway. At one point, I can see myself slip out in my party dress to get a breath of fresh air, but there’s nothing else.

I’m about to give up and leave when something catches my eye.

In the corner of the screen, I see a figure, wearing a black hooded jacket, walking past the alley. They seem to stop, look around, and then turn. And then they're gone, out of sight. I point at the screen, my heart pounding.

"There!" I say, my heart pounding. "Who is that?"

"Just a passerby," Mr. Caldwell says with annoyance. "Abby, I really don't have time—"

"Just... Go back," I insist. "Where did he go?"

Mr. Caldwell does as I ask, and we watch the figure's approach in slow motion. Once again, he stops, looks around, and then turns. But he doesn't just disappear; he slips into the alley, sticking to the shadows. His clothes are so dark that I missed it the first time, but I can see him now.

And he's headed toward the side door to my restaurant.

I furrow my brow as I pull out my phone to retrieve the footage from my own cameras on that night. But on my footage, at the exact same time, it's completely different.

I can see the figure walking past, but after he stops and looks around, he just keeps going. He doesn't turn, doesn't disappear. He just walks down the street.

Chapter 343

Karl

I make my way back to the pack territory, leaving Abby behind in the city.

It's not an easy decision, but it's what she wants. Besides, like she said, the pack needs my attention.

I've only been home for a day, but I've been lost in pack matters the entire time. I feel bad that I can't call Abby, but I know we'll be able to chat at some point. After all, our relationship went to the next stage over the weekend. We didn't officially get back together, but it's something.

And I'm happy with it for now, so long as it's what she wants.

I'm engrossed in reviewing pack matters when Marcus strides into my office. His brow is furrowed, and he's holding his phone in his hand, a hint of concern on his face. Without preamble, he asks, "Karl, have you seen this?"

I glance up at him, curiosity piqued, and motion for him to continue. Marcus holds out his phone, and I lean forward to see what's caught his attention. A news clip is playing on the screen, and the headline reads, "Dozens Sick at Alpha Gathering. Abby to Blame?"

I nod, my expression grim. "I'm aware of it, Marcus."

He looks at me, his gaze probing. "So, are you going to handle it for her? It seems like the two of you are back together."

I lean back in my chair, sighing. "First of all, Marcus, Abby and I are not back together," I clarify, my tone firm. "Second, I'm staying out of it. I'm not doing anything other than offering my support behind the scenes."

Marcus raises an eyebrow, clearly surprised by my response. "What changed, Karl? You would've paid people off in the past to sweep something like this under the rug."

I meet his gaze squarely. "I'm not that type of guy anymore," I say. "Abby asked me to stay out of it, and I respect her wishes. Period."

There's a moment of silence as Marcus processes my words. "I see," he says slowly. "So, you're just going to let her handle it on her own?"

I nod, even though my thoughts on the matter are like a storm inside my head. "I am. Unless she asks me for help, I won't go against her wishes."

"Well, I hope she can handle it herself," Marcus says as he turns to leave. "It's a mess out there."

I watch him go, his words echoing in my mind.

A sense of sadness washes over me as I reflect on the situation. If Abby were still my wife, I would never allow something like this to happen to her. I would have used every resource at my disposal to protect her and salvage her reputation.

But she's not my wife, and I need to come to terms with that reality. Abby made it clear that she wants me to stay out of it, and I have to respect her wishes, even if it pains me to do so.

Because, at the end of the day, my main goal is to win her back. And going against what she asked isn't going to help with that.

Chapter 344

Today, during a particularly important meeting with other pack leaders, I find myself distracted.

The conversation revolves around alliances and trade agreements, but my mind keeps drifting to Abby and the challenges she's facing.

I try to refocus, but it's a struggle.

One of the businessmen, a rival pack's representative, takes notice of my distraction. He smirks and leans forward, addressing me with a condescending tone.

"Karl, it seems like you've been more interested in your personal life lately than in pack matters," he says, his words dripping with sarcasm. "Perhaps you're too focused on women to pay attention to what's truly important."

I bristle at the accusation, my jaw tightening. "Pardon?"

He shrugs. "We all know what happened with your ex-wife. It's obvious you're too worried about her to think about your pack."

“That’s ridiculous,” I say with a scoff. “My pack always comes first. I’m offended that you’d even suggest that.”

The others at the table exchange knowing glances, and I can sense their skepticism. The businessman who called me out smirks again before leaning back in his chair.

“Actions speak louder than words, Karl,” he says, his tone mocking. “Maybe it’s time you prove your commitment to your business and stop acting like a lovestruck schoolboy.”

Before I can say anything else, he stands and grabs his briefcase, walking out. I’m too shocked to speak as the other businessmen file out, shooting me disapproving glances and muttering under their breaths.

I’m left alone in the room, seething with frustration. I clench my fists, resisting the urge to punch the wall.

This is not how I envisioned my leadership, and I refuse to let anyone undermine my authority.

...

Ethan regards me with a sympathetic expression as he sits across from me. We’re sitting in my garden out back, having coffee.

“Karl, I heard about what happened in the meeting,” he says gently.

“Did you, now?” I ask, trying not to scoff.

He nods. “Karl, you know it’s okay to be worried about Abby, but as an Alpha, you have to maintain your focus on pack matters.”

I sigh and run a hand through my hair, a bit put off by my brother’s words. “I have it under control,” I say, a little more harshly than I intend. “You don’t need to worry.”

Ethan looks at me for a moment as he sips his coffee. "I'm sorry, Karl," he says, "but I'm not seeing it. You're distracted, and no matter how much you try to hide it, it's obvious."

"What are you really getting at, Ethan?" I find myself asking.

He sets his coffee cup down with a serious look in his eyes. "I think I should take over as Alpha again, Karl," he says. "Now that I'm on the road to recovery, I think it's time."

His suggestion hits me hard, and I stand so abruptly that my chair scrapes on the stone patio. "You're joking," I hiss.

But Ethan just nods. "Karl, I think it's time. You've put in a lot of good work over the years, but you were never meant to be the permanent Alpha. You know that, right?"

Chapter 345

Abby

I can't believe what I'm seeing.

The footage from Mr. Caldwell's gallery security cameras clearly shows a hooded figure walking toward the side door of my restaurant on the night of the Alpha party. But on my own CCTV footage, at the exact same time, the figure just keeps walking down the street.

This doesn't make any sense.

I've been sitting in my living room, replaying the footage from both cameras—mine and Mr. Caldwell's—over and over, trying to make sense of it.

The discrepancy between the two clips is glaring, and I can't shake the feeling that something sinister is at play here. It's as if someone deliberately tampered with the footage.

Frustration gnaws at me as I continue to review the footage. I wish I could figure this out on my own, but it's clear that I need some technical help if I'm going to get to the bottom of this. I grab my coat and

the USB drive containing the footage and head out of my apartment for what feels like the millionth time today.

As I make my way to a nearby computer store, my mind races with questions.

Who is that hooded figure, and what were they doing near the side door of my restaurant? Could they be connected to the food poisoning incidents and the other strange occurrences that have plagued my business?

I push open the door to the computer store and approach the counter, where a young man wearing a beanie is busy helping another customer. I wait patiently until it's my turn, my heart pounding with anticipation.

When it's finally my turn, I place the USB drive on the counter and clear my throat. "Excuse me," I say, trying to keep my voice steady, "I need some help with this footage. I think it might have been tampered with."

The young man, whose name tag reads 'Colin,' looks at me with a curious expression. "Tampered?" he asks.

I nod. "Can you please just take a look?" I ask. "I figure maybe someone here could be able to tell if it's been changed."

He gives me a sideways look, but finally nods. "Uh, sure thing," he says, taking the USB drive and plugging it into the beat-up laptop that's sitting on the counter. "I guess I could look."

I watch anxiously as Colin opens the footage and begins to review it. I tell him the time stamp, and he fast-forwards through the recording until he reaches the part where the hooded figure appears. I hold my breath, hoping that he'll be able to see something, anything.

After a few moments, Colin stops the playback and turns to me, his eyes wide with surprise. "You're right," he says. "There's definitely something off about this footage."

I let out a sigh of relief, grateful that someone else can see the discrepancy. "Can you tell what happened?" I ask.

Colin nods and points to a specific portion of the footage, the part where the hooded figure stops, looks around, and then keeps walking. "See here," he says, "it looks like a chunk of time was cut out. See that jump cut there?"

I lean forward, squinting. Colin rewinds the moment a few times so I can see, and sure enough, there it is: a brief flicker in the tape, a moment where the hooded figure's movements don't quite make sense. It looks like a glitch, almost.

My heart sinks as I realize the implications of this. "So, you're saying that someone intentionally tampered with the footage?" I ask, my voice trembling.

Colin hesitates for a moment before responding. "It's possible," he says, then pauses, looking me up and down. "You're Abby, right?"

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"No problem," Colin says.

With a new sense of determination, I head out of the store and begin hurrying down the street, straight toward the nearest police station. I have to show them the footage; surely they'll be able to do something, right?

As I'm walking, my phone rings, and I hesitate for a moment before answering when I see the caller ID.

It's Leah.

"Hello?" I say, my voice a bit hesitant.

"Abby..." Leah's voice is filled with concern. "How are you holding up?"

I take a deep breath, trying to sound as composed as possible. "I'm holding up just fine," I reply, although the truth is far from that. "In fact, I'm going to the police right now."

"The police?" Leah sounds even more concerned now. "Why?"

"I found something in my CCTV footage," I say. "Something that will exonerate me. I'm sure of it."

There's a brief silence on the other end of the line, and I can almost hear the gears turning in Leah's head. "What did you find?" she finally asks, her tone cautious.

I explain what I saw in the footage—the hooded figure walking up the alleyway on the night of the Alpha gathering. I'm convinced that this person must have broken in and contaminated the food, but the footage from my restaurant's cameras has clearly been tampered with.

Leah doesn't say anything, just listens, and I can almost imagine the expression on her face as she processes the information. She says nothing for a long time.

My heart sinks as realization dawns on me. Chloe must have thought I was acting frantic. I can't blame her for being concerned, but it still stings.

"Chloe asked you to call me, didn't she?" I ask, my voice betraying a hint of frustration.

Leah hesitates for a moment before answering. "Yes, she did. She called me yesterday and said that you seemed really upset and that you were trying to handle everything by yourself. I'm worried about you, Abby."

I can feel my anger simmering just beneath the surface. It's as if my friends think I'm going crazy, that I'm incapable of handling this situation on my own. But I know what I saw in that footage, and I refuse to be dismissed.

"I'm not crazy, Leah," I say, my voice trembling with frustration. "I know this was sabotage. I can't just sit back and let the health department and the Alpha gathering managers handle it. They might not get to the bottom of this."

Leah tries to calm me down, her voice gentle and soothing. "Abby, I know you're not crazy. I believe you. But maybe it's best to let them handle this. Maybe it's better if you just... stay out of it."

I feel a surge of anger and disappointment. It feels as though no one believes me, like I'm on a wavelength all of my own.

"But I have to do something," I say, my voice determined. "I can't just wait around and hope for the best."

Leah sighs. "I get it, Abby. I really do. But maybe you should take a step back and think about it. Sometimes, it's better to just let the professionals handle things."

Chapter 347

Abby

I can't believe I'm back at the police station again. It feels like déjà vu, but I'm here on something new this time. Rather than a potential arson, I'm here because someone may have poisoned the food at the Alpha gathering and framed me.

Although, perhaps those two events are related.

I'm standing at the front desk, clutching the USB drive containing the tampered footage from my restaurant's CCTV cameras. The officer on duty, Officer Harris, looks at me with a mixture of skepticism and curiosity on his face.

"Ma'am, let me get this straight. You're saying that someone tampered with these tapes?" Officer Harris asks, his tone guarded.

I nod, my determination unwavering. "Yes, I'm certain of it. There's a clear discrepancy between the footage from my restaurant's cameras and another set of security cameras from a nearby building. I had a professional look at my footage, and he discovered a jump cut. I need you to take a look."

Officer Harris exchanges a doubtful glance with his colleague, Officer Rodriguez, who's sitting behind the front desk as well. They seem hesitant, and I can sense their reluctance to get involved in what they might perceive as a petty dispute.

"Ma'am, I can file a report for you," Officer Harris says slowly and cautiously, "but there's not much else I can do."

I swallow. I feel so small beneath their gazes, and I know that they think I'm just acting crazy—just like everyone else seems to think. Leah's words echo in my mind.

"Leave it to the professionals," she had said. "Stay out of it."

But how can I? How can I just sit around, hoping that the health department's samples will come back negative? No, I need more proof. I need to show them that, even if those samples do come back positive, that it's not my fault.

Someone is out to get me, and although I don't know who, I know it's a targeted occurrence. Too many things have happened over the past few months for it not to be. Arson, cut wires, burst pipes, two outbreaks of food poisoning?

It makes no sense.

"There has to be more you can do," I say, my voice raising slightly. "Please, officer, I really need to show you—"

"Just another disgruntled business owner," Officer Rodriguez mutters under his breath to Officer Harris, loud enough for me to hear.

I grit my teeth, feeling a surge of frustration. This is not a petty dispute. My livelihood is at stake, and I'm convinced that someone is deliberately trying to ruin my business.

"I promise you, this is important," I say, my voice steadier now. "Please, just take a look."

Before Officer Harris can respond, another officer approaches us. I recognize her immediately; it's the same officer who helped me with the arson case. Officer Martinez.

"Is there a problem here?" Officer Martinez asks, casting a stern gaze at Officer Harris and Officer Rodriguez.

Officer Harris seems taken aback by Officer Martinez's presence, and he quickly stammers, "Well, this lady claims her security footage was tampered with."

I hold my breath, hoping Officer Martinez will take my concerns more seriously. She gives me a nod, signaling for me to follow him to a quieter area.

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I think, furrowing my brow. "No," I say, shaking my head at first. "There isn't anyone."

Officer Martinez raises an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

For a few more moments, I just think, my eyes fixed on my lap. But then, it finally occurs to me.

Gianna and Daniel.

I take a deep breath, meeting Officer Martinez's gaze. "There are two, now that I think of it," I explain. Choosing my words carefully, I explain my history with both Gianna and Daniel to the officer; starting with Gianna's sabotage of my marriage to Karl, and ending with Daniel's sabotage on live TV.

Both of them have it out for me for different reasons. Gianna wanted my husband, my title, and my life; and she almost got it. And Daniel? He wanted to win the cook-off. Both of them are possible suspects, but Daniel is the most obvious.

Maybe he was disgruntled after having his title taken away and wanted to get back at me. But it doesn't fully explain the arson and the other events leading up to the cook-off, unless he knew of me beforehand and wanted to take me down ahead of time.

But why me in particular? Why not go after any of the other contestants?

Officer Martinez jots down notes as I speak. “I see,” she finally says, setting her pen down once I’ve finished. “We’ll investigate this matter thoroughly, Abby. In the meantime, do you have any evidence that could link either of these people to this?”

I shake my head, feeling a sense of helplessness now. “No, nothing concrete,” I admit, my voice dropping. “All I have is the footage.”

There’s a silence, and I meet the officer’s gaze again. She looks stern, but also understanding. “I just had to bring this to your attention,” I continue, feeling hot tears beginning to prick at the backs of my eyes. “I can’t let my restaurant—my livelihood—suffer because of someone’s vendetta.”

Officer Martinez nods sympathetically. “I understand your concerns, and I’ll do my best to look into this. Rest assured, we take any potential tampering of evidence seriously. If we find any leads, we’ll contact you.”

“Thank you so much, Officer Martinez,” I say, standing. “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

The officer smiles, standing, and nods. “Abby,” she says, “I saw your interviews around the cook-off, and I agree with you; women have it tough in this world. Trust me, I know. It took a lot of blood, sweat, and tears for me to get to the point where people like those two bozos out front take me seriously, and even now, it’s still an uphill battle.”

“Really?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

Officer Martinez nods. “Yes. That’s why I want to help you,” she says. “Women should stand by each other. I’m standing by you, Abby.”

Her words bring tears to my eyes. I quickly blink them away, holding my hand out. “Thank you, Officer. I mean it.”

Chapter 349

Karl

Before I know it, several days have passed since my brother suggested an election.

The outcome of this election will determine who will be the Alpha. It's not what I expected, but in a strange way, it's invigorating. The past few days have been filled with early preparations: setting dates, interviewing campaign managers, and coming up with campaign slogans and posters.

I wish I could be there for Abby, but I haven't heard for her. The news hasn't let up, though, and it seems as though the health department is waiting on tests to come back before they reach a verdict.

It's a sunny afternoon when I'm sitting in my office, in the midst of a pile of paperwork. The news is playing on the TV—a segment on the Alpha party disaster.

"Unfortunately, the owner of the restaurant La Belle Vie Bistro and the caterer of the Alpha gathering, Abby, has yet to comment on the situation," the reporter, a blonde woman in a tight dress, is saying.

"I have to say," one of the other reporters, a balding man in a suit, chimes in, "it's a bit fishy that she's refusing to comment."

The first reporter laughs. "I agree, Stan," she says. "If she's innocent, why not comment on it? Why not try to exonerate herself? She's been radio silent, although reports indicate that she's been spotted running around the city like a madwoman."

The footage then cuts to a paparazzi photo of Abby. She's got that blue surgical mask on to cover her face, and she's storming down the street. It looks like there's something in her hand, and there's a determined look in her eyes.

"Now this," the male reporter says, "was taken right before she walked into a police station. Interesting, isn't it?"

The female reporter grins. "Interesting indeed, Stan. I think—"

I can't take it anymore, and before the female reporter finishes her sentence, I quickly shut the TV off and throw the remote down on my desk with a sigh.

For a moment, I stare at my phone, my fingers itching to call Abby. I want to be there for her; hell, I'll drop everything to go back to the city if she needs me right now.

But at the same time, I can't do that. She told me to stay out of it, and besides, I've got the campaign to deal with here.

And if I want to keep my status as Alpha, now is definitely not the time to be rushing to the city, especially not in the midst of all this bad press.

Before I can ponder on it more, there's a knock on my door.

"Come in."

The door swings open, and in comes Ethan. He's no longer in his wheelchair, and is instead leaning on a cane.

"Hey, Ethan," I say, looking at him over the pile of papers on my desk. "You look good."

Ethan grins. "I feel like an old man."

I shrug. "Doesn't matter. You'll be back to normal in no time. And besides, the cane suits you; it's... distinguished."

My brother chuckles as he hobbles over to the chair opposite my desk and sits down. It's moments like this that I realize that, despite the fact that we're supposed to be adversaries in this political campaign, he's still my brother. And I still love him.

"So, what brings you here?" I ask, leaning back in my chair.

Ethan sighs and runs his hand through his hair. "Campaign managers," he says. "Do you have one yet?"

I shake my head. "I held some interviews yesterday but haven't made a decision yet. Why?"

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I shake my head, incredulous. "You don't understand, Ethan. Gianna can't be trusted. She has a history of manipulation and deceit. I'm still trying to wrap my head around the fact that you're dating her, let alone hiring her to handle your campaign."

Ethan's expression tightens, and he shoots back, "Karl, that's just your personal bias talking. Gianna didn't do anything wrong, and I won't let you hold grudges against her. Her emails were tampered with, and we've cleared that up."

His words make me groan. I've already tried to make him realize the truth multiple times, but he's just not seeing it. In his eyes, Gianna did nothing wrong, and I'm the one who's causing trouble.

"Ethan, you know how I feel about her," I say with a sigh. "I thought I could look past the fact that you two are together because I just want my brother to be happy, but... Ethan, she's a cheat and a liar. You don't want her managing your campaign. And frankly, I don't want her involved."

Ethan's eyes narrow, and he leans in closer. "Karl, I won't tolerate hate speech against Gianna. She's going to be a part of this campaign whether you like it or not, and I expect you to treat her with respect."

I lean back in my chair, frustrated beyond belief. It's clear that Ethan won't budge on this issue, and arguing further will only strain our relationship.

"Fine," I mutter under my breath. "Call her in, then."

A moment later, Gianna is standing in front of my desk, and I feel as though I'll scream. But I manage to keep my cool for the sake of not only my campaign but also my brother, and instead focus my frayed nerves on the election.

"Hello, Gianna," I say, leaning back in my chair. "So you're going to be Ethan's campaign manager."

She nods, her snakelike eyes fixed on me as she stands beside my brother's chair. She's got her hand on his shoulder, and I want nothing more than to swat it away and tell her to get the hell away from him.

I know what she did, too; she lied to Ethan the whole time he was in that coma. She took advantage of his situation and whispered deceit into his ear. And by the time he woke up, he was already head over heels. There's no possible way to make him see logic now.

When someone is in love, making them see the truth is like teaching a fish how to fly.

But for a moment, I think to myself that this could be a good thing; this could give me the edge I need in this election. My brother just woke up from a coma, and he's already dating the woman who essentially committed an act of treason against my wife.

I have the proof, and no matter how much it hurts, I think I might just use it if need be.

"So, Gianna," I say, "I didn't know you had experience running campaigns."

She looks at Ethan, then back at me. "I believe my cumulative experience in other fields will allow me to be the best campaign manager your brother deserves," she says, her thin lips stretching into an even thinner smile.

I'm about to say something when Gianna's phone suddenly rings, breaking the silence. She pulls it out of her pocket and furrows her brow, then quickly excuses herself. Ethan and I watch her go before he turns back to me.